

**SPECIAL ISSUE**  
**Restructuring and Resisting Education**  
**Reforms in Chicago's Public Schools**

education policy analysis  
archives

A peer-reviewed, independent,  
open access, multilingual journal



Arizona State University

Volume 25 Number 54

June 5, 2017

ISSN 1068-2341

**The Landscape of Education “Reform” in Chicago:  
Neoliberalism Meets a Grassroots Movement**

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**Citation:** Lipman, P. (2017). The landscape of education “reform” in Chicago: Neoliberalism meets a grassroots movement. *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 25(54).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/epaa.25.2660> This article is part of EPAA/AAPE’s Special Issue on *Restructuring and Resisting Education Reforms in Chicago’s Public Schools*, Guest Edited by Dr. Federico Waitoller and Rhoda R. Gutierrez.

**Abstract:** This article examines the dialectics of Chicago’s neoliberal education policies and the grassroots resistance that parents, teachers, and students have mounted against them. Grounding the analysis in racial capitalism and neoliberal urban restructuring, I discuss interconnections between neoliberal urban policy, racism, and education to clarify what is at stake for communities resisting Chicago’s policies. The paper describes deep and pervasive racial inequities, school closings, privatization, and disenfranchisement driving organized opposition and the labor-community alliance at the center of organized resistance. I argue that neoliberal education policy is racialized state violence, and education is a battleground for racial justice and Black self-determination. I conclude with observations on Chicago’s experience so far that might be useful in other contexts.

**Keywords:** urban education; neoliberalism; anti-Black state violence; resistance; race

## El paisaje de la educación “reforma” en Chicago: El neoliberalismo se encuentra con un movimiento de base

**Resumen:** Este artículo examina la dialéctica de las políticas de educación neoliberal de Chicago y la resistencia popular que los padres, maestros y estudiantes han montado contra ellos. Fundamentando el análisis en el capitalismo racial y la reestructuración urbana neoliberal, discuto las interconexiones entre la política urbana neoliberal, el racismo y la educación para aclarar lo que está en juego para las comunidades que resisten las políticas de Chicago. El artículo describe las profundas y generalizadas desigualdades raciales, el cierre de escuelas, la privatización y la privación de derechos que conducen a la oposición organizada y la alianza entre el trabajo y la comunidad en el centro de la resistencia organizada. Sostengo que la política de educación neoliberal es la violencia racializada del estado, y la educación es un campo de batalla para la justicia racial y la autodeterminación de los negros. Concluyo con observaciones sobre la experiencia de Chicago hasta ahora que podrían ser útiles en otros contextos.

**Palabras clave:** educación urbana; neoliberalismo; la violencia contra el estado negro; resistencia; raza

## A paisagem da educação “reforma” em Chicago: O neoliberalismo é um movimento popular

**Resumo:** Este artigo analisa a dialética das políticas neoliberais Chicago educação e resistência popular que os pais, professores e alunos montaram contra eles. I basear a análise sobre o capitalismo racial e reestruturação urbana neoliberal, disputar as interconexões entre neoliberal urbana política, racismo e educação para esclarecer o que está em jogo para as comunidades que resistem políticas Chicago. O artigo descreve as disparidades profundas e generalizadas raciais, fechamento de escolas, privatização e privação de direitos que levam à oposição organizada e aliança entre o trabalho ea comunidade no coração da resistência organizada. Defendo que a política de educação neoliberal é a violência do Estado racializado, ea educação é um campo de batalha para a justiça racial e auto-determinação dos negros. Concluo com observações sobre a experiência de Chicago tão longe que poderia ser útil em outros contextos.

**Palavras-chave:** educação urbana; neoliberalismo; a violência contra estado preto; resistência; raça

## Introduction

*Rahm Emanuel is building a Second City. Two cities really...one white, one black. One for the rich, one for the poor. One for private schools, one for closed schools. A new Chicago for the saved and the damned. Gold coast heavens and low-end hells. It's biblical, binary....*

*As Chicago goes, so goes the country. And we are here fighting for freedom, for all, for every person from every zip code. We are fighting for the soul of the city, the soul of the country. We are building again, indeed, a second city, as we derive our nickname from the ability to rise after the ashes and great fire of 1871. Chicagoans have the ability to rise like a phoenix. This is a testament to the resiliency of hard working people everywhere, not the backroom dealings of a millionaire mayor or his posse.*

*We are the city of the eight-hour workday and the Haymarket martyrs. The home of Margaret Burroughs and Fred Hampton, home of Jane Addams and the mothers of Whittier Elementary School. A city of genius and gangsters. This is a writer's and fighter's town as Nelson Algren would say. And this is a fight to counter the mayor's vision of a future city, of two cities. We*

*are trying to write and fight for a united city, a different city. A second city. A new city, a city anew, a city for all. For real.*

(Kevin Coval, April 3, 2014, Rahm Emanuel's Chicago, a Tale of Two Cities, CNN. <http://www.cnn.com/2014/04/02/opinion/coval-chicagoland-rahm-emanuel/>)

Chicago poet, educator, and activist Kevin Coval, captures the struggle for the “soul of the city” that is at the heart of battles over public education. Chicago is a laboratory for what Watkins (2011) called the racialized “assault on public education” in the U.S. and a focal point of popular resistance and grassroots organizing. This dialectic defines the landscape of public education in the city. In this article, I describe and analyze this dialectic and locate it in a broader race and class struggle for the city itself. Chicago has its own specific political, economic, and social history, but the corporate-driven policies that are shaping the city’s education system and the resistance they have provoked are national and global. Looking closely at this dynamic in Chicago can provide insights more broadly.

Chicago pioneered neoliberal education policies—policies designed to restructure public education on free market principles (Lipman 2011). In 1995, the state legislature gave Mayor Richard M. Daley control of Chicago Public Schools (CPS) with authority to appoint the Board of Education and CEO (formerly Superintendent). Daley and his successor, Rahm Emanuel, generally filled the Board with corporate executives, bankers, and investors and appointed corporate-style managers as CEOs.<sup>1</sup> These mayor-appointed regimes designed a top-down accountability system that applied business methods to public schools and deployed high stakes standardized tests as a metric to close schools and create a market of privately-run charter schools (Lipman, 2011). Under the George W. Bush and Obama administrations, Chicago’s education “reforms” went national. They were codified in the No Child Left Behind act of 2002 and Obama’s 2009 Race to the Top federal competitive education grants (Lipman, 2016). A decade of shuttering neighborhood public schools, primarily in Black and Latinx neighborhoods, against protests of parents and students, and expanding charter schools culminated in 2013 when the Board of Education closed 50 CPS schools. Robin Kelley’s (2016) description of coercive neoliberal policy suits Chicago well:

“the toxic mix of privatization, free market ideology, and a ‘punitive state’ come together in our schools. Those who survive the school of ‘discipline and punish’ and high stakes testing are faced with increasingly narrow opportunities for higher learning and social advancement” (pp. 30-31).

Chicago is a leading edge of a national policy of closing urban schools. In recent years, Detroit, New York, and Chicago have closed more than 100 public schools; the District of Columbia closed 39 since 2008; Columbus, OH, Pittsburgh, St. Louis, Houston, Philadelphia, Washington DC, Kansas City, Milwaukee, and Baltimore have closed more than 25 (Journey 4 Justice, 2014). By 2015, New Orleans had closed every traditional neighborhood public school. In what George Lipsitz (2011) calls the fatal coupling of “race, place, and power,” (p. 61) the closings have mostly affected students of color, primarily Black students (Journey 4 Justice, 2014).

Opposition to school closings, education privatization, and disenfranchisement has fueled an education movement that is beginning to challenge the neoliberal education agenda as a whole and

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<sup>1</sup> They included Paul Vallas, Mayor Daley’s budget director; Ron Huberman, CEO of the Chicago Transit Authority, and the current CEO, Forrest Claypool, a career politician and former Superintendent of the Chicago Park District.

link education and racial justice.<sup>2</sup> In Chicago, African American and Latinx parents and community organizations took the lead, beginning in 2004. Their organizing attracted teachers who, in 2008, formed a radical caucus of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). Just two years later, the caucus won the leadership of the third largest teachers union in the US. The new leadership's explicit opposition to neoliberal policies, its alliance with parents and community members, and its social movement organizing signaled the rebirth of teacher unionism in the US on new grounds (Lipman & Gutstein, 2013). Relentless protest by a multi-racial coalition of parents and a revitalized CTU have made Chicago a focal point of national resistance.

But I argue in this paper that the struggle over education in Chicago is about more than schools. It is about race and capital, state violence, claims to urban space, and political power. I argue that resistance to education policy in Chicago is an expression of the rejection of neoliberal policies to remake the city for capital accumulation (Brenner & Theodore, 20002; Harvey, 2005) and to simply abandon, contain, or drive out those whose lives do not matter and are, in fact, disposable in a context of corporate hegemony, elite consumption, and whiteness (Haymes, 1995; Shabazz, 2016; Wilson, 2007). Chicago is, "Two cities really...one white, one black. One for the rich, one for the poor." The dialectic of economic, social and spatialized inequalities and resistance to them is rooted in the city's historical amalgam of racial segregation and machine politics, collusion of the state and capital for real estate profiteering and disinvestment in Black communities (Coates, 2014), and the unfinished business of Chicago's Black freedom movement (Danns, 2014; Homel, 1984). Chicago's education landscape is integral to this dialectic.

There is a robust critical literature on neoliberal education policy (e.g., Au & Ferare, 2015; Ball, 2012; Hursh, 2015; Saltman, 2015), its racialized agendas and effects (Dumas, 2013; Picower & Mayorga, 2015; Scott, 2011), and its imbrication with urban development and political economy (Buras et al, 2010; Lipman, 2011, 2016; Pedroni, 2011). Extending this scholarship, in this article, I aim to contribute to a deeper understanding of the dialectics of neoliberal urban education "reform" and resistance as an expression of resistance to racial capitalism. I examine the stakes in the battle over education and what can be learned from Chicago's labor-community alliance and grassroots movement. I begin by grounding the analysis in racial capitalism and neoliberal restructuring of urban space. I describe my methodology and data and provide a brief overview of Chicago as a laboratory for neoliberal restructuring of public education and resistance. In the next section, I summarize the deep and pervasive racial inequities in CPS as a root of resistance. Then I discuss interconnections between neoliberal urban policy, racism, and education to clarify what is at stake for communities resisting Chicago's policies. In this section, I focus on education policy as racialized state violence and propose that education is a battleground for racial justice. In my discussion of resistance, I foreground the formation of a community-labor alliance, the strategic role of the Chicago Teachers Union and centrality of Black and Latinx parents and the struggle for racial justice. I conclude with some observations on Chicago's experience so far that might be useful in other contexts.

## Racial Capitalism and Urban Space

Renewed interest in Cedric Robinson's (2000) analysis of racial capitalism and recent scholarship (Camp, 2016; Childs, 2016; Melamed, 2011; Taylor, 2016) have invigorated discussion of the co-constitution of capitalism and racism in the US. From the dawn of capitalism, white

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<sup>2</sup> See for example, Alliance to Reclaim our Schools <http://www.reclaimourschools.org/>; Journey for Justice Alliance <https://www.j4jalliance.com/>; Bad Ass Teachers Organization <https://www.badassteacher.org/>.

supremacy was mobilized for the accumulation of capital, launching the long-term historical structures and ideologies that made capitalism a world system and that continue to shape the economy and social life today (Robinson, 2000; Williams, 1944/1994). The centrality of white supremacy to neoliberal accumulation strategies is the present-day iteration of this dynamic. Neoliberal social policies and methods of governance that enable capital accumulation are created, instituted, and organized through the cumulative effects of past discrimination and structural racism (Taylor, 2016). For example, privatization of public housing and schools in African American and Latinx communities is enabled by historical racially discriminatory mortgage lending, and disinvestment in public housing and schools and is justified by racist ideologies (Coates, 2016; Imbroscio, 2008; Lipman, 2009; Pedroni, 2011). George Lipsitz (2014) describes this process:

The ideology of contemporary capitalist neoliberalism needs to disavow the idea of race, because race references historical social identities not reducible to market relations... [yet] neoliberalism needs race even more than previous stages of capitalism did. By making public spaces and public institutions synonymous with communities of color, neoliberals seek to taint them in the eyes of white working-class and middle-class people, who then become more receptive to privatization schemes that undermine their own stakes in the shared social communities that neoliberalism attempts to eliminate (p. 11).

Conversely, capitalism and its crises have shaped the character of white supremacy and the racial order in the US over the past three centuries (Marable, 2015/1983). Evolving strategies of capital accumulation have shaped racial discourses and how racism is structured, experienced, and legitimated, e.g. from legal segregation and Black Codes to civil rights to liberal multiculturalism and colorblind racism (Melamed, 2011). Today, racism has taken a neoliberal turn. “Post-racial” colorblind discourse and the ideology of individual responsibility obscure the actual intensification of racism and negate claims of racial injustice while the demonization of people of color justifies dismantling public institutions and the social state.

Naming racial capitalism illuminates the social forces driving neoliberal education policies and why racial justice is central to resistance. Neoliberals promote the market as the path to civil rights and racial equality (Melamed, 2011). Charter schools and school “choice” are offered up as the civil rights movement of our time while market logics underpin No Child Left Behind and Obama’s Race to the Top federal policies (Lipman, 2016). At the same time, the neoliberal state enforces the racial order through coercive policing and containment (Camp & Heatherton, 2016; Taylor, 2016) and social policies that strip workers, women, and communities of color of rights and public resources, e.g. school closings and punitive racially discriminatory discipline policies (the “school to prison pipeline”). Despite the state’s reliance on winning consent for dominant agendas, racialized state violence has always been an indispensable tool of capitalism (Childs, 2016; Robinson, 2000). The explosion of the prison population in the US over the past 30 years and police murders of African Americans are just the most visible ways in which the neoliberal state uses coercion to police the harsh inequalities of neoliberalism and to contain resistance movements (Camp, 2016; Camp & Heatherton, 2016; Taylor, 2016). I will argue that Chicago exemplifies urban education policy as state violence.

Cities are laboratories for racialized neoliberal experimentation. Brenner and Theodore (2002) describe neoliberalism as a “complex, multifaceted project of socio-spatial transformation” (p. 16). Neoliberal urban restructuring is accomplished by rolling back welfare-oriented public institutions and social policies and rolling out new institutional arrangements and policies that support capital accumulation through markets, urban entrepreneurship, and speculative investment.

Privatization of schools and education services is part of this strategy. The neoliberal city is an entrepreneurial city. Neoliberals mobilize urban space for market-oriented economic growth, international tourism, and elite consumption practices (Harvey, 2001) facilitated by racial exclusion and containment (Lipsitz, 2007; Shabazz 2016). Investment in real estate and the revenue generated by real estate sales and taxes is pivotal in the neoliberal urban economy (Smith, 1996). We see this in national and local policy to dismantle public housing while providing municipal financing of market-oriented projects and subsidies and infrastructure for real estate developers and gentrification (Hackworth, 2007). This is a material and symbolic process of “reclaiming” the city as a space of corporate culture and whiteness, materially and discursively (Hackworth; Haymes, 1995; Smith) while criminalizing low-income people of color and their neighborhoods as “bad” and needing to be “cleaned out” (Camp & Heatherton, 2016). The result is a city of luxury zones and hardship zones—gentrification and displacement, downtown development and neighborhood disinvestment, wealth and poverty, inclusion and exclusion—demarcated by race, ethnicity, and class (Nolan, 2015).

## Methodology

This paper is particularly informed by my participation in education organizing in Chicago over the past two decades as a member of Teachers for Social Justice and the Grassroots Education Movement. I write as researcher and participant in parent-student-teacher-union coalitions and campaigns to defend and transform public education, to contest school closings and privatization and to develop and press for alternatives. Rejecting the binary of rigorous research and political involvement, I claim the “situated objectivity” of engagement in the dialectics I analyze (Gutierrez & Lipman, 2016; Hale, 2008). I have worked alongside parents and teachers and students and benefitted from their insights, and I have seen first-hand the lived experience of CPS policies. While I look carefully at school district data and policies, I privilege the perspectives of the people directly affected, Black and Latinx families, students, and their teachers who bear the brunt of the policies I discuss. Their voices are central to analysis of the dialectics of racial neoliberal policy and community resistance.

My discussion also draws on data collected over the past 20 years of following Chicago’s education and urban policies and urban education policy nationally. The data include: observations of scores of public meetings; interviews with parents, community members, teachers, and students; and research projects with parents, community organizations, and union researchers.<sup>3</sup> Collaborating with parents, teachers, urban studies scholars, and teacher union researchers, we mapped the relationship of school policies onto housing and neighborhood patterns, community conditions, and demographic factors, and gathered testimonies of people directly affected by CPS policies. We catalogued school disinvestment and tracked CPS policies. The paper also draws on analysis of news media, policy documents, reports, and publicly available demographic and education data. It leans heavily on reports I co-authored on school closings; the intersection of education policies, housing, and urban development; and Chicago’s appointed school board (Fleming, et al, 2009; Greenlee, et al, 2008; Gutierrez & Lipman, 2012; Lipman, Vaughan. & Gutierrez, 2014; Lipman, Person & KOCO, 2007; Lipman, Smith & Gutstein, 2012). The data and analyses are a collective product of teachers, parents, community activists, and researchers working together.

## A Laboratory for Neoliberal Education Policy and Resistance

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<sup>3</sup> Much of this collaborative work was done through the Collaborative for Equity and Justice in Education at University of Illinois at Chicago (ceje.uic.edu)



Chicago has had a long history of racially segregated and inequitable schooling rooted in residential segregation and racist housing and labor markets (Coates, 2016). In 1963, Black parents organized massive school boycotts against overcrowded, racially segregated, under-resourced schools (Danns, 2014). Later in the decade, as the Black Power movement took hold, parents, teachers, and students organized sit-ins, walk-outs, boycotts, and conferences to demand community control of schools, African American history, and more Black teachers and administrators and academic improvements. In 1984, Latinx parents marched on Clemente High School in the largely Puerto Rican Humboldt Park community to demand action on the high Latinx dropout rate and violence in schools (Kyle & Kantowicz, 1992). There were also four teachers’ strikes between 1980 and 1987 to contest the state’s failure to fund decent salary increases and needed school improvements. During the 1987 strike, a People’s Coalition of Black and Latinx parents formed to demand thoroughgoing school reform (Kyle & Kantowicz, 1992). One result was 1988 state legislation establishing elected Local School Councils with parents and community members in the majority. (See Lipman, 2004, for discussion of this history.) Despite gains from these grassroots movements, CPS has persistently failed to provide equitable education for African Americans and Latinx who comprise the vast majority of CPS students (CPS is 90% students of color and 85% low-income), see Danns; Lipman, Gutstein, Gutierrez, & Blanche, 2015; Orfield, 1990). In short, there has never been a “golden age” of education in Chicago.

CPS’s past failures set the stage for Chicago to be a testing ground for neoliberal education policies. Chicago was one of the first cities to establish mayoral control as a means to fast-track neoliberal policies without interference by elected, publically accountable school boards. In the early years of mayoral control and top-down accountability (1997-1998), CPS put over 100 schools on probation under direct control of central administration, and retained in grade thousands of mainly Black and Latinx children. The annual posting of standardized test scores was a ritual of public shaming of Black and Latinx students, their teachers and schools, and by implication their families and communities. The purported objectivity of standardized test scores obscured the lived reality of disinvestment and destabilization, of strangled aspirations and futures cut down, of subjectivities disciplined by a culture of public punishment and humiliation (Lipman, 2004).

Initially, the discourse of holding schools and teachers accountable for education outcomes and the appeal to reject the “failed policies of the past” resonated with some teachers and parents as a solution to then-Secretary of Education William Bennett’s famous pronouncement that Chicago’s schools were “the worst in the nation” (Schools in Chicago, 1987). There was little push back from the compliant leadership of the Chicago Teachers Union. But the tyranny of high stakes tests and the degradation of teaching and shaming of schools and students took its toll in teacher demoralization and psychic and educational damage to students (Lipman, 2004). The school district was run like a business with performance management systems and high stakes tests governing teaching. Schools in low-income Black and Latinx communities were subjected to a revolving door of centrally-mandated programs and external monitors and a regimen of testing, scripted curriculum, and punishment for failure (Lipman, 2003). A current of deep discontent with the injustice of it all ran beneath the surface of teacher and administrator compliance, bubbling up in public critiques by parent and education advocacy organizations, teacher and student boycotts of standardized tests in 1999 at several schools, and the exodus of dispirited teachers.

In 2004, Mayor Richard M. Daley launched Renaissance 2010 a dramatic plan to make school closings and privatization the centerpiece of CPS’s “reform” agenda. Renaissance 2010 was the spark that ignited a grassroots opposition movement. The plan called for closing 60-70 public neighborhood schools and opening 100 new schools, two-thirds as privately-run but publicly-funded

charter and contract schools<sup>4</sup> (Lipman & Haines, 2007). The blueprint and rationale were developed by the Commercial Club of Chicago, an organization of the city's most powerful corporate and civic elites (Left Behind, 2003). Hewing to market logics, the Commercial Club contended that "failing" public schools needed to be replaced by a competitive market of private operators who would run schools more efficiently and effectively. Standardized tests provided the metrics for an annual wave of neighborhood school closings and take-overs by private "turn-around specialists." The first target was a plan leaked in fall 2004 to close 20 of the 22 schools in the Midsouth Bronzeville area on Chicago's Black South Side where the Chicago Housing Authority was also dismantling thousands of units of public housing. But parents and community residents organized to stop it, charging that the real goal was "displacement"—to push out Black families and gentrify Bronzeville (Lipman & Haines, 2007).

Thus began the battle over school closings and education privatization in Chicago led by coalitions of Black and Latinx community organizations, teacher and parent groups, students, and later the Chicago Teachers Union. Each year the Board of Education voted to close anywhere from 6-18 schools. And year after year, parents and teachers mounted campaigns to save their schools. Despite their problems, these schools were anchors of their communities. Many had proud histories of graduating Black intellectual and cultural icons and teaching multiple generations of the same families. At a community meeting in 2005 to oppose CPS' plan to close Englewood High School, a community member received a rousing ovation when he told a CPS representative, "We're being pushed out of the city under the guise of school reform." A former student said, "When you destroy a community's school, you destroy a community" (author field notes). This sentiment was repeated in school closing hearings around the city. In the North Lawndale community, a parent described school closings as "an act of war on the community" (author field notes).

But despite candlelight vigils, pickets, rallies, sleep-outs in front of the Board of Education in winter, press conferences, public testimonials, tears and outrage, and data that countered a narrative of failure, the appointed Board of Education mostly rubber stamped the mayor's annual list of schools to be closed. Simultaneously, the Board steadily authorized more charter schools. CPS also mutated its tactics. When transferring students to schools across neighborhood boundaries led to student conflict and violence, and bad press, CPS added "turn-around schools" to its repertoire of school actions. Students stayed in the building but CPS closed the school and "turned it around" with a private operator and new staff—a closing by another name. When the Board's criteria for "failing schools" was challenged, CPS closed schools for "under enrollment." When there was outrage at the lack of notice before closing a school, CPS began a public hearing process. By 2012, CPS had closed, turned-around, phased out, or consolidated over one hundred schools, directly impacting more 42,000 students, 88% of whom were African American (Vevea, Lutton & Karp, 2013). Schools that were over 99% students of color represented 80% of the affected schools, with Black communities hit hardest (Caref et al, 2012). It was pretty clear that CPS' market agenda was a racial agenda (Weber, Farmer & Donoghue, 2016). And annual authorization of more charter schools illuminated the connection between high stakes testing, school closings, and privatization.

Although parents and teachers were only able to stop a handful of closings and turnarounds, through their campaigns Black and Latinx community organizations and parent and teacher groups forged a grassroots coalition. They organized, marched, picketed, slept out, and sat in. They held press conferences and public forums and produced research that made connections between school closings, privatization, gentrification and racism and contested the neoliberal discourse of school

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<sup>4</sup> Private organizations are contracted by the Board of Education to run public schools, but unlike charter schools, contract schools remain public, and employees are members of teacher and school employee unions.



choice, educational efficiency, and failing schools. They called for parent and student voice and community-driven school improvement. “Whose schools? Our schools” and “We didn’t fail, the system failed us” rang out in marches and rallies.

The financial crisis of 2008 provided a warrant to accelerate school closings and institute budget cuts across the city. The budget cuts and the mayor’s unpopular unilateral decision to extend the school day brought white middle class families into conflict with CPS, face to face with an imperious school board, and in contact with Black and Latinx parents whose neighborhood schools had been perpetually under-resourced and were threatened with closure. In 2008, teachers in the grassroots coalition launched the Caucus of Rank and File Educators (CORE) to challenge the failure of the leadership of the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU) to fight CPS’s neoliberal agenda. In just two years, in a surprise upset, CORE won the leadership of the 30,000 member CTU. These developments set the stage for a multi-racial, multi-class parent/community and labor alliance that would be the backbone of a campaign for an elected school board, for community-driven school transformation, progressive revenue solutions, and the fight for the city itself.

In fall 2012, teachers’ accumulated anger at serial school closings, coupled with budget cuts and 15 years of high stakes testing and treating schools like businesses exploded in the first teachers’ strike in Chicago in 25 years. Under a new militant leadership, the union exercised its power in mass action, shutting down every school, organizing rallies that shut down downtown Chicago, and marching through neighborhoods. The strike was a carnival of resistance, a citywide mass demonstration of the collective power and voice of teachers, parents, and students and a resounding NO to the mayor and the Board. The strike was widely seen as a victory for the union and was celebrated by teachers around the U.S., inspiring new possibilities for teacher unionism in the US (Peterson, 2014). A reinvigorated CTU, under the leadership of CORE, emerged as a central actor in the struggle for public education in Chicago and nationally.

Mayor Emanuel’s rejoinder was swift and dramatic. Following the strike, he announced a CPS’ budget crisis that he claimed would require “right sizing” the district by closing up to 140 “underutilized” schools, a number eventually whittled down to 54. After six months of tumultuous protests, the Board voted to close 50 neighborhood schools, the most ever closed at one time by a U.S. school district. The closings affected 42,952 students (Vevea & Lutton.2013); 79% were African American. To date (2017), CPS has closed, turned around, consolidated, or phased out (all closings by another name) 157 schools.<sup>5</sup> There are now 130 charter schools and 31 schools run by the contract school operator, Academy for Urban School Leadership, most in Black and Latinx communities. Almost one quarter of the school district’s 660 schools are privately managed.

More than a decade of school closings and charter school openings has changed the education landscape in Chicago—spatially and politically. Some African American areas of the city now have almost no public neighborhood schools left. When CPS closed Dyett High School in 2012, Bronzeville lost its last neighborhood public high school. In 2013, five African American community areas had 60% of children attending schools outside their neighborhood, due largely to school closures (Karp, 2013). However, parents, students and teachers who had never been involved in public action were drawn into organized opposition to the mayor and the Board. Thousands participated in public hearings and organized petitions, rallies, pickets, press conferences, and candlelight vigils, culminating in a three-day march across the city led by a coalition of community, parent, and teacher organizations and the CTU. In the end, the Board closed 50 schools anyway, but the strength of the resistance, the testimonies of children and parents, the potential effects on

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<sup>5</sup> Because some schools were consolidated with others, turned around several times, or renamed it is difficult to track the actual number.

families and children's safety undermined the mayor's narrative of efficiency and education improvement. Mayor Emanuel got his way, but parents and students won the moral victory.

The appointed Board's autocratic decision-making and inability to be held accountable for policies that were devastating to CPS families (Lipman, Vaughan & Gutierrez, 2014) provoked a grassroots campaign for an elected school board that won two city-wide advisory referenda with nearly 90% approval. The referenda put the mayor on the defensive and launched a drive for state legislation mandating an elected representative school board for Chicago. In short, the mayor and Board of Education have paid a high political price for their agenda—a critical loss of legitimacy that raised the stakes, bringing into question their leadership and agenda for the city as a whole.

## A More Inequitable Education System

Opposition to CPS policies is a response to a deeply inequitable education system. Chicago has a well-known history of racially segregated and inequitable schooling, but after 20 years of neoliberal policy, Chicago Public Schools are more unequal by nearly every measure than when mayoral control was instituted in 1995. Unequal opportunities to learn in a racially discriminatory and unjust city (Caref, et al, 2015) have produced persistent racial disparities in test scores and graduation and dropout rates which have not narrowed since 1995 when the mayor took over the school district, and on several measures disparities have increased (Lipman et al., 2015). High stakes testing and accountability, school closings, selective schools and programs, privatization, and CPS budget priorities have exacerbated historical inequalities, creating a more sharply tiered system of learning opportunities and racial disparities (Lipman et al, 2014). A civil rights complaint filed against CPS in 2014 noted that students attending Dyett High School, in the African American Bronzeville community, had no Advanced Placement or honors classes, while students at a mix of five neighborhood and selective enrollment schools had between 5 and 37 advanced classes (Advancement Project, 2014). In 2012, seven times more Black students had neither music nor art classes than students of other races, and, due to charter school proliferation in Black communities, Black students were disproportionately taught by inexperienced first year teachers (Chicago Teachers Union, n.d.). Although the specific data may not be widely known, the inequity is blatant and was a frequent theme in public hearings about school closings. As one parent put it, "If CPS does what it does in schools on the North side [more affluent and white], and gives [us] the same amount of resources, [our school] will get the same results. It is unfair to expect the same result when different resources are being provided" (author field note, quoted in Lipman, Smith, & Gutstein, 2012).

Top-down accountability policies and high stakes tests pressed low-scoring neighborhood schools, particularly in Black and Latinx communities, to narrow curriculum to tested subjects (reading and math), replace text books with test prep booklets, focus instruction on test preparation, and mandate scripted instruction in some schools (Hauser, 1999; Lipman, 2004). The schools that CPS put on probation beginning in 1996 were overwhelmingly Black, with an average poverty level of 94% (Parents United for Responsible Education, 1999). Although the Board funneled millions of dollars to outside probation partners to oversee school improvement, by 2013, almost 2.5 times as many schools were on probation as when the policy began—159 elementary schools (more than one-third of CPS elementary and middle schools) and half of the district's high schools (Ahmed-Ullah, 2013). The students and schools experiencing these mandates were almost entirely African American and Latinx.

Chicago's education market, known as "options for knowledge," further stratified schooling by race/ethnicity, social class, and neighborhood. In the late 1990s, the Board began expanding a top tier of selective enrollment high schools, mainly in affluent white and gentrifying areas. With

competitive admissions based heavily on test scores, students whose elementary schools offered fewer rich learning opportunities clearly had limited access to these (the district’s best) high schools (Lipman, 2004). Selective enrollment schools were designed to keep middle class families in the school district and were anchors for real estate development in gentrifying areas (Lipman, 2004; 2011). They benefitted disproportionately from CPS investments, including new or fully renovated buildings, state-of-the-art programs and resources, a rich array of courses and co-curricular opportunities (Williams, 2000), and additional funding from the district’s general education budget (Chicago Public Schools, 2014).<sup>6</sup> Those fortunate enough to attend are just 11.7% of CPS high school students (Chicago Sun Times, cited in Lipman et al, 2015) and are almost 2.5 times more white and three times more well off than CPS students as a whole (Novak, 2014).

At the same time, CPS opened seven military high schools in low-income African American and Latinx communities and provided additional funds to charter schools and schools managed by the contract operator, Academy of Urban School Leadership (Hood & Ahmed-Ullah, 2012).<sup>7</sup> Budget cuts have also disproportionately impacted neighborhood schools compared with charter schools (Better Government Association, 2015, Karp, 2013). School closings in Black communities and expansion of charter schools also led to loss of Black teachers. From 2000 to 2014, CPS lost 4,385 Black teachers (Illinois Interactive Report Card, 2011), a decline from 40.6% to 23.4% of the teaching force while the percentage of white teachers increased from 45.4% to 62.3 %. Charter schools hire a larger percentage of white teachers than CPS schools (see also Jankov & Caref, in this issue).

When CPS launched Renaissance 2010 in 2004, the CPS Board President said CPS could not wait to “rescue” students from failing schools (Lipman & Haines, 2007, p. 475). He promised students would go to “better” schools. Thirteen years and 157 closed schools later, the results have not lived up to the promise. Most students did not end up in schools that performed substantially better on the district’s metrics, and in some cases performed worse. Most students displaced from 2004-2006 transferred to schools no better than those that were closed, with 80% transferring to schools in the bottom half of the system on standardized tests (de la Torre & Gwynne, 2009). In the 2013 mass school closings, although 93% of displaced students enrolled in a school with a higher performance rating than their closed school (some only minimally so), only 21% enrolled in schools that could be expected to significantly benefit students academically (de la Torre, Gordon, Moore, & Cowhy, 2015). To counteract powerful protests against mass school closings, CPS promised additional resources in all receiving schools and allocated \$83.5 million in additional funds to help students make the transition. However, a CTU report (Caref, Hains & Jankov, 2014), based on CPS data, found that only 10%, \$9.3 million, actually went to the schools for investments in resources. The central office allocated the remaining \$74.2 million for moving costs, monitoring closed buildings, and “safe passage programs” to address the many safety concerns raised by the closings.

Expansion of charter schools, mainly in Black and Latinx communities, has also not improved education overall. Despite additional public and private funding and greater autonomy from district requirements, their academic performance is mixed and overall no better than traditional, neighborhood public schools (Golab, Schlikerman, & FitzPatrick, 2014; Mihalopoulos,

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<sup>6</sup> For example, the 2013 renovation of Jones College Prep selective enrollment high school in Chicago’s gentrified South Loop neighborhood made it the most expensive public high school ever built, \$127 million with cost overruns (Novak, 2014).

<sup>7</sup> CPS gave the Academy of Urban School Leadership an additional \$300,000 and \$420 per student, per year, for each elementary school it runs, and \$500,000 and \$500 per student, per year, for each high school.

2014; Institute on Metropolitan Opportunity, 2014).<sup>8</sup> Yet CPS continues to authorize additional charter schools while continuing to cut neighborhood school budgets, even as parents have mounted mass opposition, particularly in Latinx communities. Charter expansion and blatant disparities in resources and concentration of capital improvements in schools disproportionately white and affluent has fueled a deep reservoir of anger and distrust of CPS.

## Neoliberal Urbanism, Race, and Education Policy

Neoliberal education policy is constitutive of the neoliberal restructuring of the city and the politics of race (Lipman, 2011). Situating education in this political-economic dynamic illuminates what is at stake in Chicago's contested education landscape. To borrow from Stuart Hall (1980), race is the "modality" through which neoliberal urban processes—including in education—are experienced, structured, legitimated, and contested. Decades of racial segregation, public and private disinvestment and racially discriminatory housing, employment, and education policy impoverished and destabilized low-income African American (Coates, 2014; Shabazz, 2015) and some Latinx areas in Chicago, and devalued the land and housing stock, making them ripe targets of profit-oriented redevelopment. Over the past 15 years, Chicago dismantled 22,000 units of public housing displacing thousands of primarily Black low-income residents and closed public mental health clinics, early childhood centers, and schools in Black communities. In a race and class conquest of the city (Smith, 1996), real estate developers and investors have remade these areas for upscale housing and retail, subsidized by tax breaks and upgraded infrastructure, e.g., new street grids and streetscapes, parks, and police stations in areas to be gentrified. Both Mayor Daley and Mayor Emanuel have taken advantage of the redirection of property taxes for schools and parks into the mayor-controlled Tax Increment Financing (TIF) slush fund to underwrite developers (Joravsky, 2015; Weber, 2003). Supposedly aimed at spurring development in "blighted" areas, almost half of the \$1.3 billion in TIF funds allocated by Mayor Emanuel since 2011 have gone to development in downtown Chicago and gentrified surrounding areas (Joravsky & Dumke, 2015).

### Disinvestment and Disenfranchisement

CPS's lack of investment in schools in Black and Latinx low-income communities contributes to overall disinvestment in the communities. Some schools lack even the basics of decent education, such as full time music and art teachers, up to date science labs, school nurses, adequate counselors, libraries, and textbooks for all students (Chicago Teachers Union, 2012; Lipman, et al, 2015). In December 2011, CPS's Chief Operating Officer stated that CPS did not intend to invest in schools that would be closed in the next 5–10 years (Ahmed-Ullah, 2011). In fact, schools serving low-income, working class African Americans, Latinx, and other students of color that CPS closed had previously endured cuts in resources and programs and multiple rounds of educational experiments and cycling of principals and district administrators, even in the face of community and parent interventions to support the schools (Gutierrez & Lipman, 2012; Lipman, et al, 2007). A Dyett high School student protesting his school's phase out summarized:

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<sup>8</sup> The Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO) 2015 study claimed "substantial" positive effects of attending a charter school. However, the study's methodology and conclusions have faced substantial criticism. Maul (2015) argues the actual effect sizes reported are very small, "well under a tenth of one percent of the variance in test scores" (p. 6), the methodology does not adequately control for differences between charter school families and those who do not choose charters, the "systematic exclusion" of lower-scoring students from the analyses, and ways the study estimates student growth.

As proof of the continued disinvestment, it is now 2012, and now we only have one honors class...they put us on probation, they took away five teachers, and the worst part is now we are on the phase-out list...CPS always says it is in the interest of the children, but in reality, it is not (Lipman, Smith & Gutstein, 2012, p. 41).

School closings and differentiated opportunities to learn are integral to a strategy that grooms targeted areas for devaluation and gentrification (Lipman, 2011)). In areas primed for redevelopment, closing schools facilitates displacement of the people who live there, making way to refurbish and rebrand them for a middle-class clientele. This is why, since CPS began closing schools en masse in 2004, parents and community members have charged that the survival of their communities is at stake. When CPS proposed the Mid South Plan in 2004, the Kenwood Oakland Community Organization charged it was “directly connected to gentrification of our communities” (Kenwood Oakland, n.d.). An African American parent we interviewed after the mass 2013 closings put it succinctly, “The reason they closing the schools so they can fade out our schools and open charter schools and push the people out of our communities” (Lipman et al, 2014, p. 23).

Expansion of charter schools and outsourcing of school nurses and custodial and food services to private companies is part of the city’s strategy to privatize public infrastructure and public labor. (Chicago also privatized parking meters, parking garages, the Chicago Skyway Bridge, and airport employment). Over the past decade, Chicago Public Schools lost roughly 30,000 students and added over 50,000 privately-run charter school seats (Black, 2013). The Board also turned over 31 schools, mostly on the African American South and West sides of the city, to the Academy for Urban School Leadership, a private operator contracted to manage CPS schools. In low-income neighborhoods, charter schools draw students away from public schools the state has neglected, hastening the closing of neighborhood schools and breaking the connections among parents, weakening the community. The loss of jobs for school support staff, who often live in the school neighborhood, also impacts the community economically

CPS also instantiates neoliberal governance by appointed bodies and public private partnerships (Brenner & Theodore, 2002). The Board of Education is appointed by the mayor and makes decisions behind closed doors, with no accountability to those affected (Lipman et al, 2007; Lipman et al, 2014). In what has become an annual ritual, thousands of parents, teachers and students who pack gymnasiums and churches for public hearings are given two minutes to argue and plead for their schools—while those who make the decisions are not present. Candlelight vigils, town hall meetings, rallies, marches, sit-ins, sleep outs, school board takeovers, petitions, public testimonies, civil disobedience and other popular expressions of protest are the only recourse the public has to make its concerns heard. By putting schools on probation and expanding privately governed charter schools, CPS also eroded the power of Local School Councils, democratically elected local school governing bodies made up largely of parents and community members. In a school district that is 90% students of color, restriction of democracy signals that people of color are not capable of governing themselves. Outrage at this disenfranchisement is a primary engine of the campaign for an elected school board.

Racism provides the material and ideological basis for these neoliberal strategies of what Harvey (2005) calls “accumulation by dispossession.” On the one hand, colorblind market discourse obscures race as a factor in inequality, on the other, race is mobilized to demonize all that is public. The role of the state and private investors in the willful production of decayed public housing, disinvested neighborhoods, high unemployment, and “failing” schools is erased by a racialized narrative of concentrated poverty and Black social pathology (Imbroscio, 2008). Racially coded discourses of urban “cleansing” and “renaissance” of “bad neighborhoods” and “failing school”

legitimate school closings and displacement of African Americans and some Latinx students (Lipman, 2009; Lipsitz, 2011). In turn, racialized disparagement of schools in Black and Latinx neighborhoods contributes to the construction of these communities as sites of violence and decay that must be remodeled for a new, more affluent, whiter, more “worthy” population (Lipman, 2009; Smith, 1996). These racially coded narratives mask the effects of racial segregation and racism and the disinvestment and churn neoliberal education, housing, and urban development policies have produced in low-income African American and Latinx neighborhoods.

### **Austerity Urbanism**

CPS is also implicated in the austerity policies that Chicago adopted in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. Like other local government officials, Chicago’s mayor and the governor of the State of Illinois quickly reframed a crisis of the Wall Street banks and speculative investors as a crisis of public debt, declaring the necessity for fiscal restraint implemented through public austerity, cutting labor costs, and selling off public assets (Lipman, 2016; Peck, 2012). On its part, CPS opportunistically seized the crisis to accelerate school closings and privatization and to press for union concessions.

CPS’s risky investments in toxic interest rate swaps caught up with them as they lost millions of dollars to Wall Street banks. At the same time, years of failing to pay into the teachers’ pension fund left the Board with millions of dollars of unfunded pension obligations (Gillers & Byrne, 2014; Gillers & Grotto, 2014; Grotto & Gillers, 2014; Martire, Otter & Kass, 2013; Roosevelt Institute, 2014). The Mayor’s solution to the crisis created by these financial decisions has been to increase regressive sales and public service taxes, cut school budgets, outsource school services to private contractors, and increase teachers’ share of their pension payments. Illinois’ governor has refused to sign a state budget without cuts to public institutions and public sector union concessions to pay for the crisis. In short, the state is attempting to impose an “extreme economy” of “austerity urbanism” (Peck, 2012, p. 628) by socializing the debt to the banks. The CTU and progressive budget groups have intervened with a set of researched proposals to retrieve untapped revenue, including recouping money from the Wall Street banks for the toxic swap deals (Roosevelt Institute, 2014), drawing on the \$1.36 billion in property taxes in the TIF fund (TIF Illumination Project), a small tax on financial transactions, and higher taxes on corporations and millionaires. Mayor Emanuel, the Illinois Governor, and the CPS Board have refused to consider these solutions.

Austerity has hit schools across the board, but not equally. While some upper middle class white parents raised thousands of dollars to cover the loss of teachers and programs, schools in low-income communities do not have the same advantage (Karp, 2015). They have had to make do without librarians, art and music teachers, and vital programs. In 2014, neighborhood high schools suffered the biggest budget losses with a third losing more than \$1 million. Nearly every neighborhood high school on the African American South and far South Side had substantial cuts (Karp, 2014). A total of 80% of the schools designated to receive students from closed schools had budget cuts of more than \$70,000—the average salary of one teacher (Karp, 2015).

The Board’s financial mismanagement and budget cuts have further eroded public confidence in CPS and increased support for an elected school board that is representative of Chicago residents. The CTU and community organizations have waged a sustained public campaign to challenge the narrative that there is no alternative to austerity. The Mayor and CPS’ refusal to consider their common sense progressive revenue solutions and to cut school programs and staff instead, provides evidence for the CTU’s claim that the mayor and the Board’s interests lie with the banks and financial institutions rather than school children. Essentially a program of economic



redistribution, the revenue campaign is an example of the maturing of the education movement from resisting to resistance *and* developing alternatives.

## **Education Policy as Racist State Violence**

Neoliberal governments protect those who are valuable to capital and make vulnerable those who are not (Ong, 2006). African American and Latinx parents and students who testified at school closing hearings, and those who we interviewed charged the state with abandoning responsibility for their education (Lipman et al, 2014). A Walter Dyett High School student said, “It just feels like they don’t care as much as we want them to. It’s been heartbreaking. CPS just turned its back on us....” (Lee, 2013). The Board voted to phase out Dyett in 2012 after years of shrinking resources and programs and destabilizing the school’s administration, despite parent and community organizing to bring resources into the school (Gutierrez & Lipman, 2012). Dyett was the last open-enrollment neighborhood high school in the African American Bronzeville area. When the Board voted to phase out Dyett, nearly a quarter of CPS’ \$423 million FY2015 capital budget was allocated to three selective enrollment high schools on the more white and affluent north side of the city (Lutton, 2014). Dyett exemplifies the state’s abandonment of Black students’ education, particularly in disinvested areas and areas being gentrified. School closings have turned some African American South and West side neighborhoods into what some parents call “school deserts.”

### **School Closings as State Violence**

Despite promises to provide additional support staff to help children deal with the chaos of the 2013 mass school closings, the CTU reported that CPS made no sustained investment in additional nurses, counselors, and social workers in the receiving schools (Caref, Hains & Jankov, 2014). Teachers in receiving schools who CTU researchers interviewed reported their schools had received no special support for English Learners, students with Individual Education Plans, or homeless students. Our research on the closings (Lipman, Vaughan, & Gutierrez, 2014) also found that children suffered emotional trauma, classes were over-crowded, and some parents felt “locked out” of their children’s new school. Parents disclosed that their children were “grieving” and they were grieving. These experiences help reframe the meaning of educational policies. It is critical to move beyond test scores and efficiency measures to grasp the human suffering, the pain and loss, that results from education policy experienced as racialized state violence (Dumas, 2014). A Bronzeville grandmother of 13 CPS students and a leading parent organizer describes school closings as “a hate crime.”

The collusion of the state and capital, the intertwined goals of capital accumulation and racial exclusion that dispossess people of color of their schools are constitutive of a larger spatialized process of organized state abandonment of low-income Black communities in particular (Lipsitz, 2014). Hulks of deteriorating empty school buildings scar Black and some Latinx neighborhoods and create safety hazards (Nitkin, 2015) in areas already facing high rates of home foreclosures, abandoned buildings, closed storefronts, and empty lots. Shuttering schools and forsaking buildings that were integral to community life and history is a declaration of the disposability of those who live there. When Price Elementary School in Bronzeville was closed in 2012, the Chicago Police Department took over part of the building for dog training. This was a daily insult to children who waited in front of their former school for a school bus that took them three miles to a school outside their neighborhood. The impact extends to the community as a whole. Schools are place-making institutions, community anchors, centers of social networks and family resources and sites of collective memory, “homeplaces” in contexts of racial hostility (Haymes, 1995). Some closed schools

were attended by generations of the same family. A parent whose child's school was closed said, "There are people who have lived in this community longer than I and watched kids come....So these are people that have long relationships with [closed school]. They family. Generations come out of this school" (interview with parent, quoted in Lipman et al, 2014, p.14). Prior to the massive waves of deindustrialization in the 1970s, the schools were institutional anchors of stable Black working class communities. At school closing hearings, while acknowledging historical racism, older community members recounted the days when "ducks swam in a pond" on the expansive green space of a South Side high school, and dedicated and talented Black teachers graduated young people who went on to be poets, musicians, and scientists. Even though the schools and communities experienced full-scale public and private disinvestment in the decades that followed, parents we interviewed frequently described their schools as "like families" (Lipman et al, 2014). Their involvement as unpaid teaching assistants, sports coaches, community liaisons, fundraisers, lunch room and playground supervisors, mentors, and crossing guards testifies to the meaning of schools in what Lipsitz (2011) terms the "Black spatial imagination," a commitment to public space as shared social space, a "public responsibility for which all must take stewardship" (p. 69).

Schools that were closed were places of African American cultural and intellectual achievements and struggles for racial justice. As described above, Chicago was the site of massive school boycotts by Black parents in 1963 and 1964 against overcrowded, segregated schools and in 1968 Black students held walk-outs and sit-ins against racist curricula and teachers (Danns, 2014). They demanded community control of schools, Black history, more Black teachers and administrators, and general academic improvement of their schools. In the late 1980s, Black parents were again at the center of a grassroots movement that won elected Local School Councils in every CPS school. This was a measure of community control of local schools. Whatever has been achieved for Black children and teachers, whatever has been accomplished to make public schools into Black-led public spaces, has been wrested from the city's powerful interests through these collective struggles. Shuttering schools named for Mahalia Jackson, Benjamin Banneker, Marcus Garvey, Mary McCloud Bethune, Wendell Phillips, Walter Dyett, and more—against the will of the parents and students—does violence to that history. School closings instantiate the neoliberal state's deployment of violence to manage crises and contain and exclude "superfluous" populations (Camp, 2016).

Chicago is also infamous for its deployment of police violence against Black, Latinx, and other marginalized people.<sup>9</sup> Since 2004, the city paid out \$662 million in taxpayer dollars to settle police torture, misconduct, and wrongful conviction claims (How Chicago Racked Up, 2016). African American and some Latinx areas of the city are zones of police occupation and high rates of incarceration (Million Dollar Blocks, 2015) and 40% of the city budget is allocated to policing. In January 2017, a United States Department of Justice report (2017) castigated the Chicago Police Department for its pattern of excessive, unlawful, deadly force and put the Department under federal monitoring. Highly publicized police shootings of unarmed African Americans have provoked a new Black liberation movement led by young people. As I write this, the city's mayor and other public officials struggle to contain the political fallout from videotaped police murders of African Americans, police torture, and the findings of U.S. Department of Justice report. The anti-Black state violence of policing cannot be separated from the persistent violence of closing schools and abandoning the education of Black children.

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<sup>9</sup> See Investigation of the Chicago Police Department. United States Department of Justice Civil Rights Division and United States Attorney's Office Northern District of Illinois, January 13, 2017. Retrieved from <https://www.justice.gov/opa/file/925846/download>

### **Dyett Hunger Strike—Disposability and the Struggle for Black Self-Determination**

Perhaps nothing more clearly demonstrated the connection between school policy, anti-Black state violence, and the spirit of self-determination than the Dyett hunger strike, a process I documented in my field notes and came to understand through conversations with community members and my direct participation. In August and September 2015, 12 African American parents, grandparents, teachers and supporters waged a 34-day hunger strike to reopen and transform Dyett High School.<sup>10</sup> In 2012, CPS began closing Dyett, the last open-enrollment neighborhood high school in Chicago’s African American Bronzeville area. Bronzeville was the initial target of Renaissance 2010, the site of the demolition of thousands of units of public housing, and is experiencing extensive gentrification (Lipman & Haines, 2007). After two years of parents, students, teachers, and community members petitioning the Board and holding public meetings and protests, culminating in parents chaining themselves to a statue outside the Mayor’s office, CPS promised to reopen the school as a neighborhood school and issued a request for proposals.

Teachers, parents, university partners, and community organizations formed the Coalition to Revitalize Dyett which developed a comprehensive proposal for a community-driven neighborhood high school of Global Leadership and Green Technology (available from author). The school they envisioned was rooted in social justice and community involvement. It was a counter narrative to the dehumanizing, second class schools that Black children experienced in CPS. The proposal was the product of a vision developed by the community over two years through multiple community discussions and forums and was lauded by education experts, but at the last minute CPS violated its own process, making it clear that the community’s plan would not be approved. After years of petitioning the Board and public officials, dozens of community meetings, and production of a 126 page proposal, Black parents, Dyett students, and community members were disregarded and dismissed. Feeling they had no further options, they took the extreme step of a hunger strike.

The hunger strike garnered national attention and became both a demonstration of Black parents’ determination to fight for quality public education—as they envision it—and a display of the state’s apparent disregard for Black parents and children. Even as hunger strikers grew weaker and several were hospitalized, city officials did nothing, although doctors and nurses pleaded with the mayor to intervene in a life-threatening situation. At a press conference announcing the end of the hunger strike, a mother on hunger strike said, “It’s been very disappointing that the mayor of Chicago will allow us to die even though we knew that he would do that because he’s allowed Black children in our streets to die every day.” Her statement linked CPS policies to the disposability of Black lives. When activists with the Movement for Black Lives marched from a rally against police murder to Dyett during the hunger strike, they connected police shootings of Black people with the anti-Black violence of Chicago’s education policies. Dyett represents what the Journey 4 Justice Alliance calls “Death by a Thousand Cuts” (2014).

The hunger strike won a partial victory. It forced CPS to reopen the school as an open-enrollment neighborhood school, but not with the Coalition’s framework. Yet parents and community members are still working to transform Dyett into the school they envisioned. The ongoing campaign is for a vision of education determined by the community itself, a claim to Black public space and to shape its future. The hunger strike illuminated education as an arena where the dialectic of racialized state violence and the struggle for Black self-determination and humanization plays out.

### **“We are Fighting for the Soul of the City”**

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<sup>10</sup> On day 24 of the strike they were joined by five more supporters and community members.

Education is a key battleground for political power and the direction of the city as a whole. The policies of the mayor and CPS officials have alienated a broad section of parents and teachers. Cuts to school budgets, the Board's risky investments and ties to Wall Street Banks, and a series of corruption scandals<sup>11</sup> have undermined the credibility of the Board, CPS officials, and the Mayor. Inequitable distribution of resources, school closings, and privatization in Black and Latinx communities, exacerbated by the state's attempt to shift its budget deficit onto schools, have provoked more than a decade of grassroots organizing and city-wide opposition. Excessive high stakes testing has triggered an anti-testing backlash and student opt out movement, with much of the impetus coming from the very middle class parents CPS is trying to retain in the school system. The Board's imperious decisions, subject to no public oversight, have fueled broad public support for an end to mayoral control and an elected representative school board.

This resistance is anchored by an alliance of two social formations—the Chicago Teachers Union and a multi-race, multi-class assemblage of community-based, educator, and parent organizations. This alliance, the Grassroots Education Movement (GEM), is the outgrowth of organizing by Black and Latinx community organizations against school closings beginning in 2004 and the CTU's transformation from a largely collaborationist business-style union into a social movement union allied with parents and students and other social movements (Weiner, 2012). One of the first things the new leadership of the CTU did after it was elected was to strategically allocate resources to organizing and research departments. And they established a “big bargaining team” of rank and file teachers to democratize and make transparent negotiations with CPS. Operating like a social movement, the union used the union newsletter to politically educate members, organized at the school level, and put the weight of its institutional resources behind mobilizing teachers to fight CPS policies in alliance with parents and students.

Despite CTU's successful 2012 strike and the power and solidarity with parents and students it demonstrated, just eight months after the strike, protests involving thousands of parents and teachers were not strong enough to prevent the Board from closing 50 schools. And despite a mass city-wide one day walk-out in April 2016 that assembled an even broader labor-community coalition against budget cuts, the Mayor has not let up on his attacks on the CTU and attempts to socialize the debt by cutting school budgets and privatizing services and staffing and blaming teachers. In spring 2016, CPS privatized school nurses and expanded charter schools. Budget cuts continue.

However, despite the many twists and turns of building a union-community coalition and its uphill battle against the powers of the mayor and entrenched political and corporate/banking establishment, CPS' racialized neoliberal narrative is no longer hegemonic. Accumulated crises and failed policies and persistent teacher-parent-student organizing, backed up by research, have precipitated a crisis of political legitimacy. This was demonstrated by two advisory referenda for an elected school board approved by almost 90% of voters (Chicago Board of Elections, 2012; Sabella & Cox, 2015). Education was at the center of the 2015 mayoral election. CTU President, Karen Lewis, had announced she was running and was ahead of incumbent Rahm Emanuel in the polls. Although she had to withdraw because of illness, the unpopularity of Emanuel's education policies was a key factor in his near-defeat for re-election, despite outspending his opponent, a former community organizer, 30-1. Polls in 2016 showed that three times as many Chicagoans trust the CTU than the mayor to improve education (Ruthhart & Perez, 2016).

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<sup>11</sup> CEO Barbara Byrd-Bennett, who had overseen the 2013 school closings, was forced to resign, convicted, and sentenced to prison for engineering a \$20.5 million no-bid contract to a professional development company she was connected with.

The state’s legitimacy was further undermined by a string of notorious video-taped police shootings of African Americans and on-going police torture scandals. A militant Movement for Black Lives left the mayor and police department reeling. The CTU’s progressive revenue solutions have gained traction, and the idea that taxing the rich is the only viable source of revenue has entered the public discourse (Patel & Kelleher, 2017). In essence, this is an opportunity for a politically progressive alternative to Chicago’s neoliberal economic, racial, and social agenda, and the contest over public education is central.

Looking back over the last decade, Chicago’s grassroots organizing has become a social force to reckon with, despite the outsized power of Chicago’s mayors in alignment with banking and corporate interests and despite losing many of the battles against school closings and the inevitable growing pains and complexities of an emerging union-community coalition. It has evolved from defensive actions to a proactive program for democratic governance (elected representative school board), revitalized and humanized public schools (CTU, 2012; Caref et al, 2015; the Dyett proposal), and economic redistribution to fully fund education.<sup>12</sup> Black and Latinx community organizations have provided much of the leadership and moral compass.

In contract negotiation in fall 2016, the CTU won the Board’s commitment to fund 20-55 sustainable community-centered neighborhood public schools,<sup>13</sup> to be developed by a taskforce consisting of CPS and GEM. Sustainable community schools are GEM’s alternative to CPS’ school closing/privatization agenda. As I write this in March 2017, negotiations are beginning over the character of these schools. This is a (contested) opportunity to create more equitable, supportive, and community driven schools that would be grounded in culturally relevant curriculum, meaningful assessment of student learning, community participation, wrap-around services, collaboration, and restorative justice. Another front in the battle to transform public education in Chicago.

## **Concluding Thoughts**

The neoliberal political-economic-racial logics driving education in Chicago are national, indeed global, but they are shaped by local contexts. A set of local actors and institutions distinct to Chicago and its relations of social forces has shaped the dynamics of the contest over education policy in the city. Nonetheless, privatization and disinvestment in public schools and attempts to make teachers and public schools pay for the fallout of the financial crisis are playing out in Los Angeles, Detroit, Philadelphia, New York, New Orleans, Newark, and other cities—albeit in ways that are locally distinct. Grassroots organizations of parents and students and insurgent union movements in these and other cities are challenging neoliberal policy. A progressive caucus won the leadership of the Los Angeles teachers union, and parents in New York won sustainable community schools. The Journey 4 Justice, an alliance of mainly people-of-color grassroots community, youth, and parent-led organizations in 21 cities, has launched national campaigns to defend public education and put racial justice in the forefront. The CTU and community organizations have also amplified their power through national organizing with other teacher unions and parent and student organizations with similar goals. The experience in Chicago demonstrates interconnections between education policy and racial capitalism and its urban dynamics. The struggle over neoliberal education

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<sup>12</sup> By using Tax Increment Finance fund for schools, recouping the Board’s losses from its toxic interest rate swap deals from the Wall Street banks, and a sales tax on financial transactions.

<sup>13</sup> The model of Sustainable Community Schools was developed by the Alliance to Reclaim our Schools.

Retrieved from

[http://www.reclaimourschools.org/sites/default/files/AROS%20Community%20Schools%20def\\_1.pdf](http://www.reclaimourschools.org/sites/default/files/AROS%20Community%20Schools%20def_1.pdf)

policy is about state violence, claims to urban space, democratic participation, and political power. So what insights can we gain from Chicago's experience so far that might be useful in other places?

First, neoliberalism is not a set of fixed policies, but a shape-shifting, opportunistic *process* of market-driven experimentation (Peck & Theodore, 2012). Neoliberalism is crisis-driven and crisis exploiting. The neoliberal state and corporate/financial actors opportunistically take advantage of crises generated by neoliberal policies to mutate and extend neoliberalization (Peck, 2012). For example, CPS' response to the fallout from the destabilizing effects of closing high schools was to create school turn-arounds, and the Board's response to the fiscal crisis it created was to expand privatization and essentially abandon schools in Black communities. Thus, the resistance has to make visible the larger racial neoliberal agenda behind specific policies. It has to educate the public, concretely, as the CTU and GEM are doing.

Second, Chicago's experience makes clear that there cannot be education justice without racial justice. The assault on public education (Watkins, 2011) is a racial assault. This was made clear by the Dyett hunger strike. Chicago demonstrates that neoliberal education policy mobilizes white supremacy to further capital accumulation and re-inscribes racism, ideologically and materially. In Chicago, as elsewhere, Black and Latinx schools, teachers, and communities are bearing the brunt of disinvestment and state abandonment *and* are constructed as the problem to be fixed through markets and top-down accountability. In a context in which public schools have never been truly equitable and Black communities have never controlled their schools, racial justice is central to a counter-hegemonic education movement. The racialization of space and negation of Black humanity saturate the neoliberal urban education project, so it is not surprising that the resolve and social vision of Chicago's Black parents have often been the leading edge of resistance. This mirrors the experience in Detroit (Wilson, 2015) and the position of the Journey 4 Justice Alliance (see Journey 4 Justice, 2014).

Third, Chicago's union-community alliance is the basis for whatever inroads have been made against CPS' agenda. The importance of social movement unionism cannot be overstated. The CTU's institutional capacity to organize, produce research, educate, and gain public voice for an anti-neoliberal anti-racist agenda have been pivotal in building an education movement in Chicago. The union's mass mobilizations and alliances with parents and students have shifted the terrain. The 2012 strike was a game changer. It demonstrated the power of teacher unions and made the CTU a force to reckon with. But the union also has much to learn from Black and Latinx parents and community organizations. In Chicago, Black and Latinx parents and community organizations have been the moral compass, the backbone, and often the political leadership of our movement. They have also been an essential support to the CTU. Nonetheless, there are inevitable race, class, and organizational disjunctions to be worked out between teachers and parents, unions and community organizations, people of color and whites. Building and strengthening community-education alliances on a foundation of shared values is complicated and unfinished.

Finally, the outcome of many battles over education in Chicago has been uneven. But the measure of this contest cannot be calculated on a scorecard of "wins" and "losses." Many schools and veteran teachers have been lost, and children's education—especially Black and Latinx children—has been, and is being, damaged and their futures put at risk. Families and whole communities have suffered. The impact is irreparable and incalculable. There have also been victories (and partial victories): Dyett reopened as a neighborhood public school; CPS was pressured by parents and students to reduce standardized testing; sustainable community schools are being negotiated; some schools were saved from closing. All these gains were the product of endless hours of organizing and marching and sitting in and researching and sacrificing. Mothers and grandmothers have spent the night in jail. People have slept on the sidewalk in winter, and starved



themselves, putting their long-term health at risk. Yet, as long as the present system and structures of power are in place, any gains are insecure. But what the education movement has accomplished, so far, in Chicago, is an accumulation of organizational strength and political consciousness and shared values and commitment. It has eroded the hegemony of neoliberal rationality and the legitimacy of the racial state and corporate/financial actors. Chicago’s education movement has evolved from opposition to CPS policies to posing solutions to remake public education, including funding through economic redistribution, racial justice, democratization of governance, and a vision of an academically rich, culturally relevant, equitable holistic educational experience for all students. These are building blocks of a protracted counter-hegemonic struggle to transform the structures of power and ideologies governing public education.

The Dyett hunger strike vividly demonstrated that the contest for the soul of public education is also a contest for, as Kevin Coval asserts, “A new city, a city anew, a city for all.” Education is a strategic pillar of the neoliberal project to remake the city for capital accumulation and racial containment and exclusion. At the same time, the persistent organizing campaigns and counter narratives of an emergent grassroots movement have opened cracks in neoliberal hegemony. In the process, Chicago teachers and parents and students have inspired others who are facing a similar education landscape in other places.

Researchers cataloguing how this dialectic plays out in various contexts may give us a fuller picture of an emerging, still largely localized, education movement and the social forces it is contesting. There are many critical questions: What are the shapeshifting dynamics of neoliberal policy making? How do education movements reframe racialized neoliberal discourses about urban public education? How do they sustain struggles against powerful economic and political actors when immediate gains are hard to come by? What can we learn about the possibility of building principled alliances of teachers, students, and parents that center racial justice and what alternatives do they develop to privatization and the historical inequities of public education? How is education related to political, economic, and social contests for the direction of the city? And what are the new challenges and possibilities of resistance in the regime of the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the US?

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Pauline Lipman is Professor of Educational Policy Studies and Director of the Collaborative for Equity and Justice in Education at the University of Illinois at Chicago. Her multi-disciplinary research focuses on the political economy of urban education, particularly the inter-relationship of education policy, neoliberal urban restructuring, and the politics of race. She is the author of numerous journal articles and book chapters. Her most recent book is *The New Political Economy of Urban Education: Neoliberalism, Race, and the Right to the City*. Pauline is a core member of Teachers for Social Justice, which organizes with parents, teachers, students, and community organizations for education justice. She is co-author of the Data and Democracy Project and other community-collaborative research projects.

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Dr. Waitoller is an assistant professor in the department of special education at the University of Illinois at Chicago. His research focuses on urban inclusive education. In particular, he examines how neoliberal informed policies, such as top-down accountability, portfolio district models, and school choice converge with inclusive education efforts, and how these initiatives affect Black and Latino students with disabilities. His research also examines teacher learning efforts and pedagogies for inclusive education.

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Rhoda R. Gutierrez is a PhD candidate in Educational Policy Studies, Social Foundations and co-founder of the Collaborative for Equity and Justice in Education at UIC. Her research interests include neoliberal education policy and governance, impact of public school closings on families, teacher labor force restructuring, and activist research. She recently collaborated on a research project with parent and teacher activist-researchers to understand the impact of Chicago's historic 2013 school closings from the perspective of parents. Rhoda is a parent-activist with Parents 4 Teachers, which organizes for education justice in solidarity with teachers, students and community groups, and is involved in the citywide campaign for an elected representative school board in Chicago.

**SPECIAL ISSUE**  
**Restructuring and Resisting Education**  
**Reforms in Chicago’s Public Schools**

education policy analysis archives

Volume 25 Number 54

June 5, 2017

ISSN 1068-2341



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